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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the present enrollment decline in public schools and its implications for students, teachers, administrators, curriculum, community, and especially school facilities. One problem of declining enrollment is that the average age and years of experience of staff personnel has tended to rise, creating a predominantly white, middle-class, middle-aged teaching profession. Also, with fewer new teachers entering the schools, the introduction of new ideas, different teaching strategies, and diversified programs may decline as well. School officials will now have to devise methods to manage the decline, the paper states, and the community will have to be kept informed of school problems. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the use of surplus facilities might be affected by federal legislation, utilized efficiently for other educationally oriented activities, adapted to suit future educational demands and clientele, or leased or sold to other educational and noneducational agencies. (Author/LD)

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ENROLLMENT DECLINE: WHAT'S AHEAD FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION?

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Depending on which "expert" you listen to, the present enrollment decline in America will continue on virtually forever, or will turn around dramatically in the mid-80s, peaking once again before the end of this century. The truth probably lies somewhere between these two "gloom and boom" predictions. In either event, however, the present decline has already begun to have a significant impact on several areas of our public education system, kindergarten through college. These conditions should be identified and addressed by all who are concerned with quality education.

Teachers

Because most teacher organizations have adopted certain established labor-management practices, excess staff brought about by declining enrollments are now released in a seniority-ordered reduction-in-force (RIF) pattern. That is to say, the most recently hired staff members are the first to be released. And these generally consist of minority group members, the non-tenured, and the young. Given such cutback procedures, reduced entry openings, and low teacher mobility, the average age and years of experience of staff personnel have tended to rise, creating a predominantly white, largely middle-class, and definitely middle-aged teaching profession. Question: Is this a desirable trend for a profession which is dedicated to preparing all youth for tomorrow's world?

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Curriculum

Along with staff reductions due to enrollment decline, some districts are considering or have already implemented curriculum consolidation or retrenchment plans. With fewer new teachers entering our schools, the introduction of new ideas, different teaching strategies, and diversified programs may decline as well. Considering that the children of today will be spending over half of their lives in the 21st Century, the challenge of preparing them for a life that does not yet exist and whose nature can only be imagined is awesome indeed. It is imperative, therefore, that we recognize the rapidly changing technological society which public education must be geared to serve and take appropriate steps to guarantee its success. Question: Dare we allow the "back to basics" mentality to prevail?

Community

Perhaps the major reason that enrollment decline solutions have fared so poorly with the general public in recent years has been the lack of convincing communication by many school officials. Too often there has been little or no advance information about or discussion of the problems of the local schools. Taxpayers suddenly find themselves faced with new problems and solutions without any real evidence of commensurate long-range planning. School officials, therefore, must make a concerted effort to keep the public aware of their activities and concerns, if they expect to have public support. Question: Can we afford not to keep our communities properly apprised of our school problems?

Administrators

In addition to the teacher, curriculum and community problems just noted, administrators have their own unique problems created by declining enrollments. After having developed the skills necessary to cope with growth, school officials will now have to devise methods to manage decline. For the first time in the experience of most administrators, they will administer "less" rather than "more." And because very little is known about this phenomenon, especially establishing priorities, administrators will find their assignments increasingly difficult. Question: Are the administrative practices of today viable for tomorrow?

School Facilities

American education faces no greater challenge than the necessity of planning effectively for the future. Today, perhaps more than ever before, effective long-range planning for all school districts is an imperative. While just a few years ago schools were often overcrowded, necessitating double sessions, many of these same facilities now have empty rooms. Some districts even have empty schools. The dilemma now is, what can or should be done with these partially used or unused school facilities?

To start, this period of enrollment decline or stabilization should be seen as ideal for review and re-evaluation of our present programs and facilities, as well as an opportunity for serious long-range planning for the future. The times seem both to permit and promote more and better educational planning. Therefore, the problem of enrollment

decline and its resultant "surplus" facilities can best be approached by considering the following questions.

1. How might present surplus space be affected by federal legislation?

In recent years several pieces of federal legislation have been enacted and compliance dates set which could have an impact on the use of surplus space. These laws are: the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX - Prohibition of Sex Discrimination in Education), Section 504 of Public Law 93-112 of 1973 (Accessibility - Rehabilitation Act), Public Law 94-142 of 1975 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act), Public Law 94-482 (Vocational Amendments of 1976), and Public Law 95-619 (National Energy Conservation Policy Act of 1978).

Each of these Acts requires attention be given to specific constituencies and each has potentially significant space ramifications. While all administrators should be acquainted with these legislative mandates and have probably initiated some sort of compliance plans, it would be prudent for districts having surplus space to re-evaluate it in terms of fulfilling the requirements of these laws.

2. How might present surplus space be utilized efficiently for other educationally-oriented activities?

While some surplus space can be expected to lend itself satisfactorily to the fulfillment of the above-mentioned legislation, some may be, by nature, unsuited without major modification. Such space can and should be considered for use as sites for alternative education programs; daycare

centers; preschool; night school; community centers; district administrative offices and even as temporary housing for classes while other sites are being remodeled or renovated. The key factors in making these decisions will be the type, size, condition and location of the facilities.

3. How might present surplus space be adapted effectively to suit future educational demands and clientele?

Even though a school district may possess surplus space at the moment, the need for space to accommodate curricular expansion in the future should not be overlooked. Also, districts must not ignore (as they did in the past) the warnings of demographers who are now predicting another upturn in school populations in the not-too-distant future. While this applies mainly to elementary facilities, eventually it would be district-wide.

4. How might present surplus space be leased or sold to other educational and non-educational agencies?

Most administrators and their boards of education are loath to relinquish possession or control of existing school facilities. This is a natural reaction, recognizing that it had often been a struggle originally to obtain those buildings. However, assuming that the present surplus facilities need not be used for federal legislation compliance, cannot be used efficiently for other educationally-oriented activities, and cannot be modified effectively for future educational demands and clientele, the matter becomes one of deciding how best to dispose of excess space.

Once again, because of the understandable reluctance of

school districts to divest themselves of hard won facilities, the first solution is to lease the properties to other public or private agencies with the agreement that the facilities will revert to the local district, should the need for them arise. In the event that long-range planning efforts indicate no further need for present surplus space, the final solution is to sell the property to whatever agency, organization or business that can function within the zoning regulations governing the site.

Conclusions

Rarely have school districts had the opportunity for an in-depth examination of themselves as this period of enrollment decline now affords. The need for thoughtful, intelligent planning for education of the future cannot be denied. It is up to both the educators and laypeople of this nation to accept the challenge. Administrators, board members and teachers, however, must take the lead and begin to formulate the educational policies for tomorrow.

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